

Society for Hispanic Professional Engineers 30th Annual
Conference
Pre-college dinner speech
Denver, Colorado
11 January 2006

Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

First off...I'm honored to be here. Thank you so much for inviting me to this fabulous event. As I look around this room, I see two distinct groups in front of me, and both deserve recognition. In one group, I see the future of this great nation represented by the young men and women here tonight.

And in another, I see the community leaders, mentors and parents who play such an important role in supporting the future of America.

I hope everyone had a great holiday season. As for me, I spent the holidays in some pretty interesting places.

A few days before Christmas, I landed on the deck of air craft carrier USS Eisenhower that was on duty in the Persian Gulf.

After spending time with the crew and visiting other ships in the battle group I headed into Iraq and visited with our troops throughout that country. From there I went to Afghanistan where I spent Christmas day.

Why do I mention this trip? Because every time I go out and visit our young men and women serving at sea and around the globe I get re-energized by the American spirit that lives in each of the sailors I meet.

I visit them on flight decks, in engine rooms on the bridges of ships and on the ground in some of the world's most dangerous places.

I meet them in places with names like Bagram, Baghdad, Mosul and Djibouti where they put their lives on the line helping to build nations so that others may find the opportunities that come with true freedom.

They are in harm's way every day and all they ask for is an opportunity to do more for their country, and more in the name of freedom.

I left them a few days after Christmas. They left me with a question I never stop asking myself. Where do we find these people?

Where do we find sons and daughters who value the ideals of this nation so much that they would volunteer to defend it at all costs?

Where do we find young men and women so valiant, so dedicated?

That brings me to this evening, and the reason I mention to you this recent trip. I'm going to tell you where we find them. And I'm talking to the students in this audience tonight. You are those Americans.

You are the men and women who will keep this country strong by living up to the full measure of your potential and becoming leaders in your schools and communities.

I look at you tonight and I see the same faces I saw three weeks ago. I see the same spark.

I look at you and I see young Americans who will lead this nation to greater prosperity than we've ever known. I see potential for greatness and a hunger for opportunity.

Opportunity to make a difference in this country, and perhaps...opportunity to make a difference to mankind.

I have no doubt that your sights are set that high. What you have in front of you are options, options that your hard work and dedication have afforded you.

But options mean choices.

You have the option to consider what kind of service you can offer this nation. You have the option to consider the value of selfless service to country. You have the option to serve.

I take you back to Iraq, back to Afghanistan, back to the oceans where our people serve our nation at sea

I told you I saw a spark in the eyes of those sailors. I wish you could see the pride I saw.

There is a sense of awareness among them that they are not just defending freedom, but introducing it to a part of the world that has never tasted it.

That spark is self worth.

It's the kind of deep satisfaction you can only experience when you know you've helped another human being.

I'm not going to stand up here and tell you that the military, the navy, is for everyone. It's not. You may not be the type of person who can thrive under some of the conditions our sailors live and work.

But if you are, if you seek an environment that requires a level of focus, a level of self discipline beyond anything you've ever imagined....well, it's an option you may want to consider.

Yes, it's an option, and options mean opportunity.

We speak of opportunity in this country, but all too often it's just a word, a catch phrase.

Let me tell you about opportunity in my navy.

Let me tell you about a young Hispanic boy without a high school diploma who twenty-six years ago went to a navy recruiting office looking for direction and an opportunity.

And let me tell you how the navy took a chance on this young man and opened a door of opportunity that changed his life.

But opportunity didn't come easy.

What the navy provided that young man was a roadmap to success and taught him that the only limits that would be placed on him were ones he imposed on himself.

Let me tell you about the leaders who saw something in him that he did not see in himself and pushed him further than he ever dreamed possible.

Tonight that once young man stands before you as a testament to the navy's commitment to our people.

Let me tell you about how the navy took this high school dropout and not only provided him the opportunity to complete his high school diploma but bachelor's and master's degrees as well.

Access and opportunity. Those are two words I use hand in hand whenever I speak with sailors, and the topic is usually education. Commands across the navy are coming up with innovative ways to allow their sailors time and resources to earn college

degrees. Because we believe that an education is critical to unlocking the full potential of our people.

We went out and contacted a large number of our sailors over the summer. I wanted feedback from them on just how much emphasis their leaders were placing on education.

Of the thousands of sailors we talked to, a great majority saw the navy as a caretaker of personal and professional development.

Our sailors told us their supervisors stressed the importance of earning their degree and guided them toward that goal.

Sound familiar? It should. You're here because you recognize the absolute value of further education.

In many cases our sailors join with significant college credits already in hand. That's a big reason our navy is superior to any military force in the world. There can be no argument that a smarter, more analytically sound fleet is a tremendous asset.

But when you leave here tonight I want you to consider that access and opportunity, those options and choices...they refer to much more than earning a degree.

The choices you make in the next few months could very well mean access to a group of people who will astound you with their dedication to this country.

If you see the navy in your future, as I hope you do, you could very well have the opportunity to engage in the noblest of professions, the defense of our freedom and democracy.

I told you of the question I pose whenever I'm fortunate enough to visit our sailors around the world. Where do we find these patriots?

You should know the answer. Its places like this. Young Americans like you. Whatever you decide to do with the next few years of your life, remember this. You are the future of this nation and I'm proud of every one of you.

Thank you.